

## 5. The Church in a Divided World: The Interpretative Power of the Christian Story

### 1. Truthfulness, Narrative, and Christian Ethics: Some Preliminary Considerations

Christian ethics as a self-conscious activity is a rather recent development. Of course being a Christian has always involved moral claims, but rarely before the nineteenth century was it thought necessary to analyze the conceptual and logical relation between Christian belief and action. Insofar as Christian ethics existed as a recognizable activity, among Protestants it took the form of practical moral guidance designed to help believers conform more completely to their beliefs. Catholic moral theology seemed to be more critically self-conscious, but impressive as the accomplishments of that tradition are, its close connection with penitential practice did not require theological analysis of the relation of religious convictions to moral judgments. In fact, Catholic claims about the status of natural law in principle implied that theological claims were not required to justify basic moral judgments.<sup>1</sup>

The preoccupation with Christian ethics as a, if not *the*, central enterprise of Christian theology is primarily a legacy of Protestant liberalism. As the central Christian beliefs came under increasingly successful philosophical and historical challenges, an emphasis on the moral significance of those beliefs seemed to offer a strategy to save their meaningfulness. Therefore Christian ethics, as a self-conscious endeavor, represented a retrenchment to secure some meaning, if not truth, for religious belief. The moral implications of the doctrines of God, Jesus, and reconciliation appeared to be the nail on which the continued viability of Christianity could hang. Of course this strategy was beset by deep problems in that no necessary relation could be shown between morality and increasingly isolated and abstract religious symbols and doctrines. While the very meaningfulness of religious discourse depended on a satisfactory account of the relation of "religion" and "morality," such accounts always seemed to involve fatally reductionistic accounts of religious beliefs. The "moral" kernel did not seem to require the "religious" claims associated with it.

This endeavor was partially obscured by the recovery of the social significance of the Gospel. The social gospel movement gave birth to a generation of Christian social critics and reformers who, often influenced by nineteenth-century theologians, turned their attention to developing strategies for the realization of justice in the social realm. They were little interested in how their conception of "justice" was derived from or informed by their religious convictions. They simply assumed that one was in some manner connected with the other. Nor were they much interested in questions of the truthfulness of their religious convictions, as they were more concerned with the social implications of those convictions.

But the question of the truth of religious convictions cannot or should not go away; it simply needs to be asked in the right way. Nineteenth-century theologians were right that moral concerns are central for understanding the power of religious convictions, but they provided a too limited account of the nature of those convictions and how they work morally. By calling attention to the narrative character of Christian convictions, however, the reductionistic assumptions associated with the ethics sponsored by Protestant liberalism can be avoided. For the fact is that there are no doctrines for which one must search out moral implications; rather "doctrines" and "morality" gain their intelligibility from narratives that promise to help us see and act in a manner appropriate to the character of our existence.

The narrative nature of Christian convictions helps us see that "ethics" is not what one does after one has gotten straight on the meaning and truth of religious beliefs; rather Christian ethics offers the means for exploring the meaning, relation, and truthfulness of Christian convictions. That is not to say that Christian convictions are proven meaningful or true by showing their ethical implications; rather they are both true and ethical in that they force us to a true understanding of ourselves and our existence. Christian ethics must deal with the fact that either separation or too close an identity between theology and ethics distorts the character of Christian convictions, as the beliefs that claim to provide a truthful understanding of God, self, and the world do so only as they also transform the self. Religious convictions, at least Christian convictions, are not primitive worldviews that must be given more sophisticated metaphysical or literal expression before they can be tested for their truth. Rather the claims they make about the way things are involve convictions about the way *we* should be if we are to be *able* to see truthfully the way things are.

If we are to understand how Christian convictions help us to form our lives truthfully the narrative nature of our lives must be recognized. To stress the significance of narrative at the very least helps remind us that the documents crucial to the life of the Christian community take the form of a

narrative. Of course some of the material in those documents is not immediately narrative in form, but such material could not exist without the narratives and indeed draws its intelligibility from them. To insist on the significance of narrative for theological reflection is not, however, just to make a point about the form of biblical sources, but involves claims about the nature of God, the self, and the nature of the world. We are "storied people" because the God that sustains us is a "storied God," whom we come to know only by having our character formed appropriate to God's character.

The formation of such character is not an isolated event but requires the existence of a corresponding society—a "storied society." Therefore the truthfulness of Christian convictions can only be tested by recognizing that they involve the claim that the character of the world is such that it requires the formation of a people who are clearly differentiated from the world. For the church, as H. R. Niebuhr suggested,

lives and defines itself in action vis-a-vis the world. World, however, is not object of Church as God is. World, rather, is companion of the Church, a community something like itself with which it lives before God. The world is sometimes enemy, sometimes partner of Church, often antagonist, always one to be befriended; now it is the co-knower, now the one that does not know what the Church knows, now the knower of what the Church does not know. The world is the community of those before God who feel rejected by God and reject him; again it is the community of those who do not know God and seem not to be known by him; or, it is the community of those who knowing God do not worship him. In all cases it is the community to which the Church addresses itself with its gospel, to which it gives account of what it has seen and heard in divine revelation, which it invites to come and see and hear. The world is the community to which Christ comes and to which he sends his disciples.<sup>2</sup>

Through the church, therefore, the world is given a history.<sup>3</sup> Indeed the term "world" derives its intelligibility from there being a people who can supply a history for the world. Of course such a history cannot ignore the fact that the world involves many separate stories that cannot be easily reconciled or even related. It is not the task of the church to deny the reality of the multiplicity of stories in the world or to force the many stories into an artificial harmony. Rather the task of the church is to be faithful to the story of God that makes intelligible the divided nature of the world.

The existence of the church, therefore, is not an accidental or contingent fact that can be ignored in considerations of the truth of Christian convictions. The church, and the social ethic implied by its separate existence, is an

essential aspect of why Christians think their convictions are true. For it is a central Christian conviction that even though the world is God's creation and subject to God's redemption it continues eschatologically to be a realm that defies his rule. The church, which too often is unfaithful to its task, at the very least must lay claim to being the earnest of God's Kingdom and thus able to provide the institutional space for us to rightly understand the disobedient, sinful, but still God-created character of the world. The ethical significance of Christian convictions depends on the power of those convictions to shape a community sufficient to face truthfully the nature of our world.

Christian social ethics should not begin with attempts to develop strategies designed to make the world more "just," but with the formation of a society shaped and informed by the truthful character of the God we find revealed in the stories of Israel and Jesus. The remarkable richness of these stories of God requires that a church be a community of discourse and interpretation that endeavors to tell these stories and form its life in accordance with them. The church, the whole body of believers, therefore cannot be limited to any one historical paradigm or contained by any one institutional form. Rather the very character of the stories of God requires a people who are willing to have their understanding of the story constantly challenged by what others have discovered in their attempt to live faithful to that tradition. For the church is able to exist and grow only through tradition, which—as the memory sustained over time by ritual and habit—sets the context and boundaries for the discussion required by the Christian stories. As Frank Kermode has recently reminded us, the way to interpret a narrative is through another narrative;<sup>4</sup> indeed, a narrative is already a form of interpretation, as the power of a narrative lies precisely in its potential for producing a community of interpretation sufficient for the growth of further narratives.

Inevitably, calling attention to the narrative shape of Christian convictions means that Christian ethics must be taken seriously as Christian. To do that seems to risk the cooperation Christians have achieved with those who do not share their convictions; or worse, it might provide justification for the church to withdraw into a religious ghetto no longer concerned to serve the world. Such a result would indeed be a new and not even very sophisticated form of tribalism. The church, however, is not and cannot be "tribal"; rather the church is the community that enables us to recognize that, in fact, it is the world we live in which has a splintered and tribal existence.

The ability of the church to interpret and provide alternatives to the narrow loyalties of the world results from the story—a particular story, to be sure—that teaches us the significance of lives different from our own, within and without our community. Indeed, we only learn what that story entails as it is lived and lives through the lives of others. If we are to trust in the truthfulness

ness of the stories of God, we must also trust that the other's life, as threatening as it may first appear, is necessary for our own.<sup>5</sup>

Christians, then, must not only discern the various gifts of individuals, they must also recognize the difference between church and world, and the differences that divide the world. It has often been assumed that acknowledgment of the divided character of the world calls into question the universality of the Christian story. If the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob could lay claim to the allegiance of all people, then it seemed that some universal theory of truth and morality (such as natural law theory) would be required to establish the basis of such a claim. Christian claims of universal salvation and the corresponding missionary enterprise seemed to intensify the need for such an account. From such a perspective the dividedness of the world could only be interpreted as an appearance of differences that masked a deeper commonality.

But the dividedness of the world cannot so easily be overcome or dismissed; rather it must first be acknowledged. Nor should the dividedness of our existence be surprising to a people who are schooled by a story that makes clear that dividedness is the character of existence for a world that knows not God.

That does not mean that Christians can give up claims of universality, but that the basis of our universalism comes by first being initiated into a particular story and community. As John Howard Yoder has argued, the universality of Christian convictions does not presume the "adequacy of the religious expression of almost everyone or at least every people in every condition, sometimes in other religions or perhaps in no religion, because of some inherent human qualities for which one considers the label 'Christ' to be a symbol."<sup>6</sup> (Yoder sees this as a temptation for the mainstream of Christendom, however, "which even when the church has lost position and privileges still wants to be taking responsibility for and giving meaning to the cultural mainstream.") In contrast, the universalism that derives from faith in the God of Israel and Jesus, a God who challenges all the narrow loyalties that constitute the world, comes from believing that his lordship "can reach beyond the number of those who know him by his right name."<sup>7</sup>

The truthfulness of Christian convictions, therefore, is not dependent on being able to generate a theory of truth that *a priori* renders all other accounts false, or that promises to demonstrate that underlying the differences between people is a deeper and more profound common morality. Rather the truthfulness of Christian convictions resides in their power to form a people sufficient to acknowledge the divided character of the world and thus necessarily ready to offer hospitality to the stranger. They must be what they are, i.e., the church, exactly because the story of God that has formed them requires them to understand and acknowledge the divided character of the world. The task of

Christians is not, therefore, to demonstrate that all other positions are false, though critical questions may often be appropriate, but to be a witness to the God that they believe embraces all truth.

## 2. Narrative and Character: The Constructive Intent and Philosophical Objections<sup>8</sup>

Many, however, assume that the kind of particularity defended above cannot avoid vicious relativism. To introduce the category of narrative appears, at best, to be a confusing and soft-headed popularization of important philosophical and theological issues; at worse it seems "morally bankrupt,"<sup>9</sup> as it renders impossible the development of significant moral discourse and action between people of different beliefs and customs just at a time when we confront problems where such discourse and actions are so much needed. "Story theology and ethics" thus manifest and reinforce some of the difficulties raised by a pluralistic culture, for such a culture offers no account of morality that can provide the basis for cooperation between different people in order to secure justice. In the interest of protecting religious convictions from critical analysis, the emphasis on story seems to encourage the attitude that every community—and worse, every individual—has their own story and there is no means for deciding that one story can be preferred to another.

From this perspective, the category of story is but a new and not very promising wrinkle on a standard form of recent Christian apologetics. By claiming that every intellectual activity, including science, rests on presuppositions that cannot be proved true, religious and, in particular, Christian convictions can be protected from radical analysis and doubt. All human activity, it is claimed, involves a kind of "faith," and religious faith therefore cannot be dismissed on grounds that it involves holding some unprovable assumptions. The emphasis on story, then, seems to be but a new word for faith, ultimate perspective, or absolute presupposition that seeks to make this apologetic move more compellingly. Insofar as some of the recent emphasis on "story theology" involves this strategy, the critics correctly argue that the category of narrative adds little illumination and a good deal of confusion for serious consideration of the status of religious belief.

However, the usefulness of the category of narrative for theology should not be dismissed because it has been and will no doubt continue to be ill used. The significance of narrative for illuminating the grammar of religious convictions is not and should not be primarily an apologetic strategy. Instead, approaching Christian convictions via their narrative character involves an attempt to do constructive Christian theology and ethics in a nonreductionistic manner, so that questions of truth may be rightly asked. Without denying the

place of abstract and general images and concepts in scripture and theology, it is nonetheless true that the most significant claims about God and the moral life take the form of or presuppose a narrative context. Any theological account of narrative, therefore, must involve an attempt to show that this is not just an accidental category but a necessary one for any true knowledge of God and the self.

The understanding and significance of narrative I wish to defend is crucial in the task of doing constructive Christian theology and ethics. Narrative provides the conceptual means to suggest how the stories of Israel and Jesus are a "morality" for the formation of Christian community and character. Thomas Ogletree may be right to suggest that narrative is or should be more central than the notion of character, but constructively I think of them as but two sides of the same coin.<sup>10</sup> As Kermode has observed,

That character, in the modern sense of the word, takes precedence over story (or "agent" over "fable") seems natural enough after two and a half centuries of the novel, and after endless practice in reading the narrative clues on which—with the help of our memories of other books, our knowledge of character codes—we found our conventional notions of individuality. Yet there is nothing natural about it; it is a cultural myth. For Aristotle the fable came first, and character followed; though this does not mean character is without importance, only that it lacks autonomy, could never originate a narrative. Character does generate narrative, just as narrative generates character. The more elaborate the story grows—the more remote from its schematic base—the more these agents will deviate from type and come to look like "characters."<sup>11</sup>

The necessary interrelation of narrative and character provides the means to test the truthfulness of narratives. Significant narratives produce significant and various characters necessary for the understanding and richness of the story itself. Just as scientific theories are partially judged by the fruitfulness of the activities they generate, so narratives can and should be judged by the richness of moral character and activity they generate. Or just as significant works of art occasion a tradition of interpretation and criticism,<sup>12</sup> so significant narratives are at once the result of and continuation of moral communities and character that form nothing less than a tradition. And without tradition we have no means to ask questions of truth and falsity.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore the emphasis on narrative and character is not an attempt to avoid analyzing the status of Christian convictions, but to enliven the discussion by reminding us of what kind of community we must be to sustain the sort of discussion required by the stories of God. Those stories are, of course, the ones found in scripture, but by their nature they have given and continue to

give birth to diverse narrative traditions which are essential to understanding the original stories. The church is nothing less than that community where we as individuals continue to test and are tested by the particular way those stories live through us.

The very variety of those stories and the corresponding variety of lives requires theological and moral reflection if we are to understand their meaning and significance.<sup>14</sup> Part of the test of the truthfulness of the church is whether it can provide a polity sufficient to sustain the differences necessary for discussion. For such differences are not just matters of variety in personal opinion or interpretation, but are required for understanding the self, God, and the world.

The crucial interaction of story and community for the formation of truthful lives is an indication that there exists no "story of stories" from which the many stories of our existence can be analyzed and evaluated. This is not to deny that a taxonomy and classification of various kinds, forms, and elements of stories and narratives might prove illuminating for certain purposes. But the constructive theological task remains primary. Our concern must be to understand better how to live appropriate to the God whom we find in the narratives of Israel and Jesus, and how these stories help provide the means for recognizing and critically appropriating other stories that claim our lives. For it is true that we always find ourselves enmeshed in many histories—of our families, of Texas, America, European civilization, and so on—each of which is constituted by many interrelated and confusing story lines. The moral task consists in acquiring the skills, i.e., the character, which enable us to negotiate these many kinds and levels of narrative in a truthful manner.

Some of these skills involve questions about how accurately and from whose point of view the story has been told. But accuracy of the narration of a history cannot be determined solely by the historian's craft, for the historian is not freed from being part of a community and a history.<sup>15</sup> Objectivity—or better, disinterestedness—is no less important for the moral life than for the work of the historian. But neither is objectivity achieved by positing a position that assumes we can find a place to stick our heads above history. Rather objectivity comes from being formed by a truthful narrative and community within history.

As Christians we claim that by conforming our lives in a faithful manner to the stories of God we acquire the moral and intellectual skills, as a community and as individuals, to face the world as it is, not as we wish it to be. Of course this remains a "claim," for there is no way within history to prove that such a story must be true. But that does not mean we are without resources for testing such a claim. The very story people hold directs us to observe the lives of those who live it as a crucial indication of the truth of their convictions.

From such a perspective it is impossible to distinguish, as Wes Robbins claims, questions regarding the truth of the narrative from its normative status.<sup>16</sup> At least part of what it means to call a significant narrative true is how that narrative claims and shapes our lives.

My refusal to posit a "story of stories" in order to provide a foundation for "morality" strikes many contemporary ethicists, both philosophical and theological, as profoundly mistaken. For it has been the intent of ethical theory, at least since Kant, to free morality from historic communities and traditions. Such theories assume that only a universal morality could be worthy of forming lives and securing moral agreement between peoples short of war. One cannot help but appreciate the moral project involved in this attempt to find a foundation for morality that might be sufficient to begin to work for a peaceful world, but the attempt was radically misconceived; it results in the positing of a moral order and rational community that simply does not exist.

Of course Gene Outka may well be right that it is a mistake to read philosophical ethics in this manner.<sup>17</sup> Instead of such a grand project, contemporary moral philosophers are best understood as involved in the more humble enterprise of providing the moral procedures necessary to sustain a society of fairness and relative justice. Without denying that there is a good deal of truth to such an interpretation, it can also be pointed out that fairness is not sufficient to sustain a good society; and such accounts of fairness, or justice, become self-deceptive insofar as they pretend to be ahistorical. Christians must be very careful how they use such accounts of "fairness," as these accounts often entail anthropological commitments that as Christians they cannot accept.

Moreover, the concentration on fairness, or promises, as the central concern of the moral life has led to a failure to appreciate the significance of character and virtue for the moral life. I have, perhaps, overstated this neglect by suggesting that a concentration on the language of duty necessarily involves a failure to provide an adequate account of virtue and character. Every account of morality, explicitly or implicitly, involves some sense of character and virtue as well as some suggestion as to which virtues ought to be central. But it is correct that in more Kantian and utilitarian moral theories<sup>18</sup> the attention paid to the concepts of character and virtue has clearly been subordinate to accounts of obligations and that, from such a perspective, if the virtues have been treated at all, they have become abstract qualities with little or no analysis of how they form or are possessed by the self. Such theories have concentrated on the concept of duty, since it alone seemed to offer the means to generate the minimal morality necessary to achieve cooperation between diverse people and thus to sustain a morally pluralistic civilization.

As a result, the relation of virtue and obligation became a "problem"

created by an unwarrantedly abstract concept of "duty" divorced from any community presuppositions that make our "duties" intelligible. Indeed, the very distinction between teleological (which is too often mistakenly limited in consequentialist accounts of morality) and deontological ethics distorts our moral alternatives rather than illuminating them.<sup>19</sup> As Alasdair MacIntyre has suggested, there is no inherent incompatibility between a *telos*, virtue, and law. He asks us to

imagine a community who have come to recognize that there is a good for man and that this good is such that it can only be achieved in and through the life of a community constituted by this shared project. We can envisage such a community as requiring two distinct types of precept to be observed in order to ensure the requisite kind of order for its common life. The first would be a set of precepts enjoining the virtues, those dispositions without the exercise of which the good cannot be achieved, more particularly if the good is a form of life which includes as an essential part the exercise of the virtues. The second would be a set of precepts prohibiting those actions destructive of those human relationships which are necessary to a community in which and for which the good is to be achieved and in which and for which the virtues are to be practised. Both sets of precepts derive their point, purpose and justification from the *telos*, but in two very different ways. To violate the second type of precept is to commit an act sufficiently intolerable to exclude oneself from the community in which alone one can hope to achieve the good. Thus the absolute prohibition of certain specifiable kinds of action finds a necessary place within a certain type of teleological framework; and since the Christian doctrine of ethics appears to be a teleology of just this type, the existence of Christian theologians who deny that there are any such absolute prohibitions would be *prima facie* puzzling.<sup>20</sup>

So the issue is not whether virtues or obligations are primary; that simply divorces virtues and obligations from the community context that makes them intelligible. Moreover, once the community aspect and the historical, dependent nature of ethical theory are recognized, there is no possibility, as Robbins argues,<sup>21</sup> of our having a choice between "pure-narrative and non-narrative" versions of ethical theory. Indeed the latter is but the ideology of a dominant culture that no longer has the confidence to acknowledge the contingent nature of their understanding of duties and virtues. Under the spell of Kantian accounts of rationality, there lingers the fear that if we recognize the historic nature of our moral convictions we will have to acknowledge them as arbitrary and possibly even false. But such fear is ill founded, as there is no

other basis of moral convictions than the historic and narrative-related experience of a community.

Ogletree<sup>22</sup> is right, therefore, to suggest that the issue between William Frankena<sup>23</sup> (and many others who share his general perspective on moral philosophy) and me is not simply what constitutes an adequate moral psychology, but the "normative framework within which actions and lives are to be morally assessed." And I have suggested that such a framework is best thought of as a narrative, not simply because Christian convictions take the form of a narrative, but because all significant moral claims are historically derived and require narrative display. What is peculiar about Christian convictions is not that they involve a narrative, but the kind of narrative they involve. Appeal to the narrative dependence and structure of moral rationality is not a form of special pleading for Christian convictions but an attempt to illuminate, in a formal manner, the character of our moral existence as historic beings.

For example, MacIntyre, in contrast to most interpreters of Kant as well as the intention of most neo-Kantians, has pointed out that crucial for the intelligibility of Kant's account of morality is the metaphor

of the life of the individual and also of that of the human race as a journey toward a goal. The journey has two aspects. There is the progress toward creating the external conditions for the achievement of moral perfection by individuals: "with advancing civilization reason grows pragmatically in its capacity to realize ideas of law. But at the same time the culpability for the transgression also grows." Within the framework of law and civility the individual progresses toward moral perfection, a progress "directed to a goal infinitely remote." It follows that the significance of a particular moral action does not lie solely in its conformity to the moral law; it marks a stage in that journey the carrying through of which confers significance on the individual's life. Thus a link does exist between the acts of duty and the *summum bonum* conceived as the goal of the individual's journey.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover MacIntyre goes on to observe that Kant's moral philosophy has kinship to a whole family of narrative portrayals of human life, of which the Grail legends are prime examples. "Human life is a quest in which a variety of dangers and harms may befall me; unless I am prepared to sacrifice my life on occasion I cannot achieve that which I seek. To fail to sacrifice my life, necessarily will be to fail as a man."<sup>25</sup> MacIntyre suggests that while such themes may originally be Pythagorean or Orphic, and reappear in Plato's myths and Socrates' death, they are crucial to Jewish and Christian accounts of the world. In both Platonic and Judeo-Christian versions it turns out that only

if I am prepared to lose my life can I achieve the goal. "Only if I place my own physical survival lower on the scale of values than other goods, can my self be perfected. Teleology has thus been restored but in a form very alien to either Aristotle's thought or Mill's. It is no wonder that Kant finds in Greek ethics no adequate conceptual scheme for the presentation of morality, but views Christianity as providing just such a scheme."<sup>26</sup>

I do not intend to try to substantiate MacIntyre's interpretation of Kant, though I find it persuasive.<sup>27</sup> It is sufficient that Kant simply be open to such an interpretation to suggest that moral philosophy presupposes a narrative context in its actual functioning. Nor does calling attention to the narrative presuppositions of Kant's ethics or any other moral philosophy show that a Christian understanding of our journey with God is either necessary or true. But at least it puts the issue in the right context, as "the individual who knows himself to be part of a moral history whose outcome is as yet unsettled may be less likely to claim prematurely that title of universal moral legislator that Kant bestowed on all rational agents and which has had such great effects on the character of moral activity."<sup>28</sup> Rather, we learn that our first moral question must be Of what history am I a part and how can I best understand it?

To answer such a question it is necessary that the stories we hold about our history be true, but again, as MacIntyre observes, "the criterion of truth for extended historical narratives is notoriously complex, and there may be periods in which the conflicting claims of rival historical interpretations cannot be put to a finally decisive test."<sup>29</sup> Yet morally we cannot live indecisively, for we must ask sacrifices from ourselves and others that seem justified only if we know our story is true. We are thus tempted to assert that we do in fact share non-narrative-dependent values or norms such as justice or benevolence.<sup>30</sup> But justice is always someone's justice and benevolence someone's benevolence; indeed the very distinction between justice and benevolence turns out to be relative to the self-understanding of historic communities. As concepts, justice and benevolence are capable of abstract display and analysis, but like all moral notions they derive their force from paradigmatic display and imagination disciplined by analogies.

The Kantian-inspired attempt to make justice integral to the allegedly rational and universal requirement to respect all persons as ends in themselves is a noble endeavor. Indeed such a vision, I suspect, draws its inspiration from the Christian hope of the realization of a kingdom where peace and not war will characterize the relation between peoples and nations. But for Christians such a kingdom remains an eschatological hope that cannot be made present by heightening the status of human rationality. From the Christian perspective Kant's account of the universal requirements of reason is a secularized version of Christian hope. Kant sought to make Christian hope into a necessary condition for rational living, but in the process hope is trivialized, for if the

kingdom can be based on or come from within humankind, then there is no reason to hope. Kant's hope is one that no longer knows how to be patient in the face of the dividedness of the world and in desperation seeks peace by making God's Kingdom a human possibility. Yet peace, Christians believe, cannot be founded on false accounts of our rational powers but depends on our learning to acknowledge God's lordship over all life. The Christian commitment to peace is based not on the inherent value of life, but on the conviction that war cannot be consistent with the Kingdom we have only begun to experience through the work of Christ and his continuing power in the church.

It must be admitted that to stake one's life on such a view is indeed dangerous. For there are many who claim their convictions to be true and assume that those who do not hold similar beliefs should be forced to do so. They are even willing to kill in defense of what they hold dear. To abandon the attempt to develop a "universal" ethic, as I have done, therefore appears as an act of despair, as we are left at the mercy of such people.

The Christian, however, does not claim that the world is safe but only that it is under God's lordship. Christian confidence in God's lordship provides the church with the power to exist amid the diversity of this world, trusting that the truth "will out" without resorting to coercion and violence for self-protection or to secure adherents. Therefore the non-resistant character of Christian community, which is often sadly absent, is a crucial mark of the power of the Christian story to form a people in a manner appropriate to the character of God's providential rule of the world.

### 3. Relativism and Tragedy

This way of putting the matter, however, will not satisfy those who are haunted by the ghost of relativism. Though the position I hold involves a certain kind of relativism, as I have tried to suggest elsewhere it is not a vicious relativism; there is no conceptual reason that prevents me from making judgments or from seeking to change the mind of those from other traditions.<sup>31</sup> The kind of relativism which must be acknowledged as part of our moral existence will appear destructive to those who want to supply a foundational account of knowledge and morality. Once that enterprise is recognized as illusory, however, then it is possible to appreciate how rational discourse and argument are possible without denying that there are often tragic and unbridgeable divisions between people.

One of the difficulties is that any account of relativism or the assumed "problem of relativism" is theory-dependent—i.e., we all know that people and cultures are different but the characterization and status of those differences depend on putative accounts of "morality." Therefore it is a mis-



take to assume that there is any one version of relativism that must be accepted. The kind of relativism I am willing to defend is similar to what Gilbert Harman<sup>32</sup> has described as his "soberly logical thesis" that morality arises when a group of people reach an implicit agreement or come to a tacit understanding about their relations with one another. Moral judgments, therefore, only make sense in relation to and with reference to one or another such agreement or understanding. Harman's use of the language of "agreement" is misleading, however, in that it gives the impression that a people's morality may be much more coherent than we know almost all significant moral traditions to be. In contrast, I assume, as I suspect Harman also does, that our morality is much less the product of an agreement than it is the ongoing experience and conversation of a people that enables them to have a history sufficient for community identity.<sup>33</sup>

→ Rather than discussing relativism so abstractly, I think it best to turn to the kind of concrete issue which we fear that admission of the truth of relativism will not let us handle—namely, would it mean that we would not say that slavery in a society different from ours is wrong? At the very outset we must be careful not to let the force of such a question mislead us. For it is far from clear that slavery is morally the same no matter what society and what kind of system of beliefs supports it. I suspect that there are many different kinds of slavery, each with its own peculiar moral difficulties and advantages. If that is so, then no single set of considerations could ever be sufficient to tell us what is always wrong with "slavery." This may be the source of some of our deepest frustrations with relativism, as we often wish to think we have a real confrontation when actually we are not even agreeing about what set of moral "facts" is involved.

X In order to discuss slavery we retreat to the theoretical mode, so that its features are derived from our assumption about what slavery must have been like in pre-Civil War America. Thus Harman asks us to conceive of a society where there is a well-established and long-standing tradition of slavery in which everyone accepts the institution, including the slaves.<sup>34</sup> However, in this society there are aspects of the basic moral agreement—or as I would prefer, their narrative traditions—that call slavery into question. In such a society, justifications for slavery would be defective, though the deficiencies might be hidden by self-deceptive accounts or myths concerning the physical and mental limits of slaves. If the myth were exposed and the incoherence became manifest, then society would in time have to change its acceptance of slavery.

However, Harman also suggests that it is possible to imagine a society where there are no aspects of a tradition that speak against slavery. In such a situation, no dissonance would ever appear in the underlying precepts of the society and slave owners could never even understand, much less act upon,

the idea that they ought to free their slaves. While there might come an external threat that would cause them to modify their views, there would be no internal moral necessity for them to do so. Harman notes that we feel much more at home making judgments about the first mentioned society because we can invoke principles that they share with us and thus we can say that they ought not to have slaves. However, this sort of judgment becomes increasingly inappropriate the more distant such a society is from us, for it is less easy for us to think of their moral understanding as being continuous with our own. We find it inappropriate to say it is morally wrong for slave owners in the second society to own slaves, though we can certainly say that the society is unfair and unjust insofar as it allows slavery.

This would seem to be a damaging admission. After all, we seem prevented from making the kind of judgments about people in the second society we feel we ought to be able to make. Relativism, even the kind defended by Harman, seems to entail the possibility that we can have two or more systems of belief which are to some extent self-contained. Yet there are empirical and conceptual limits to that kind of self-containment. First, it is implausible to assume that any group of humans will or can have a belief system that is fully coherent. Our common historical nature means it is very likely that we will find we share something in common, though what we share may not be sufficient to gain agreement concerning such issues as slavery. Secondly, the conceptual difficulties in stating the problem of relativism imply presuppositions that qualify the extent of relativism; i.e., "the application of a notion such as 'a culture' presupposes the instantiation in the subject-matter of a whole set of relations which can be adequately expressed at all only via the concepts of one culture rather than another. Any relativism which denied the non-relative validity of concepts involved in setting up its problem at all would be refuted."<sup>35</sup>

Yet neither of the qualifications is sufficient to ground a universal morality capable of refuting moral relativism. In contrast Bernard Williams has suggested that the "truth in relativism" is our inability to envision something about another life as a "real option" for me. For Williams a "real option" would mean the ability of people to change their convictions so that they can live within and retain their hold on reality while making rational comparisons between the new option and their present outlook and then acknowledge their transition to the new option in the light of such comparisons.<sup>36</sup> To speak of people who have made such a "real option" as "retaining their hold on reality" is to imply that it is possible for them to change without engaging in extensive self-deception, paranoia, or other such things.

Williams suggests that most discussions of relativism are misleading, because they only deal with notional confrontations.<sup>37</sup> A notional confrontation resembles a real confrontation, that is, a confrontation where a real option



is a possibility, but it differs from the latter exactly because one or the other position is not a real option for me. Thus, examples used to create the problem of relativism—i.e., the life of a Greek Bronze Age chief, or a medieval Samurai—do not serve well, since those ways of life are not real options for us. We simply have no idea what it would mean to live them.<sup>38</sup> Reflection on such examples may help us think about elements missing from our own lives, but there is no question of our becoming one or the other.

Williams argues that only in situations of real confrontation do we appropriately employ the vocabulary of appraisal—"true-false," "right-wrong," "acceptable-unacceptable." Such a vocabulary is employed because where there is a different system of belief that is a real option for us we feel we must organize what is to be said in order to accept or deny it as our own. That we often do not feel the need to employ such language reveals the truth in relativism, as we find that many confrontations do not involve questions of a real option at all and thus issues of appraisal simply do not arise, or they arise only notionally.

Williams maintains that this understanding of relativism, unlike most of the alternatives, is coherent. It manages to cohere with two propositions, both of which are true: first, that we must have a form of thought not relativized to our own existing system of beliefs for thinking about and expressing other systems of beliefs which may be of concern to us; but, second, we can nevertheless recognize that there can be many systems of beliefs "which have insufficient relation to our concerns for our judgments to have any grip on them, while admitting that other persons' judgment could get a grip on them, namely, those for whom they were real options."<sup>39</sup> Williams rightly notes that most traditional forms of relativism have paid insufficient attention to the first proposition relativizing the categories of appraisal into "true for us," or "true for them." The problem with such formulations is that they cannot account for the reality of real confrontations. In like manner, vulgar relativism, the view that combines a relativistic account of ethical terms with a non-relativistic principle of toleration, fails to deal with real confrontation, since it assumes the impossibility or pointlessness of choosing between options that do not matter to anyone. The problem with vulgar relativism is it treats all moral convictions as if they were only notional commitments.

Williams' account of the truth of relativism shows why there can be no way of formulating a moral theory capable of defeating relativism in principle. Rather, once we rightly understand the nature of relativism, we see that morally we must deal with one confrontation at a time, because that, in effect, is the nature of our world. What we require, therefore, is not an argument that provides an *a priori* defeat of relativism, but an interpretation of and the corresponding skills to live in a world where others exist who do not share my moral history. I have tried to suggest above that Christian understanding of the

divided character of our existence provides just such an interpretation as well as a context in which we have the means to negotiate such a world.

Christians are forbidden to despair in the face of the dividedness of the world. On the contrary, we are commanded to witness to others that there is a God that overcomes our differences by making them serve his Kingdom. The task of the Christian is not to defeat relativism by argument but to witness to a God who requires confrontation. Too often the epistemological and moral presuppositions behind the Christian command to be a witness to such a God have been overlooked. The command to witness is not based on the assumption that we are in possession of a universal truth which others must also "implicitly" possess or have sinfully rejected. If such a truth existed, we would not be called upon to be witnesses, but philosophers. Rather the command to be a witness is based on the presupposition that we only come to the truth through the process of being confronted by the truth.

The command to be a witness does not entail *a priori* judgments about the beliefs and life of others—e.g., what is right or wrong with Hinduism or Islam—though such judgments after time may be appropriate, but rather witness derives from no other source than that which invites us to "look what manner of life has been made possible among us by the power of the cross and resurrection of Christ." The invitation to join such a life is made not on the assumption that there is something wrong with the others' beliefs, but it is made because we are all sinners and through participation in this community we have the possibility of finding redemption. We are not sinners because we are Hindu, Muslim, secularist, or Christian, but because we are people who live as though we can be our own creator and redeemer.

In the terms used above, therefore, the task of Christians is to be the sort of people and community that can become a real option and provide a real confrontation for others. Unless such a community exists, then no real option exists. The manner of providing such an option, moreover, entails that Christians go to every land and every people in the hope that they can elicit a real confrontation on matters that matter. Such confrontation may sometimes take the form of explicit argument, but the validity and power of such argument ultimately depends on the church being a society where people manifest the unity that can come only from worship of the true Lord of our existence. Therefore the kind of unity in diversity characteristic of the church must always stand in sharp judgment of the diversity in the world where most of our confrontations are either notional or violent.

The kind of alternative the church provides will differ from society to society, system of belief to system of belief, from culture to culture, state to state. Indeed the church will often learn from different cultures what is and is not essential to its own life. Too often the church becomes but a mirror of one cultural option rather than a mirror to which each culture should compare

itself. Confronting and learning to live in many cultures is the necessary condition for Christians to test what is and is not essential for their life together. Christians must always remember the God they serve is found among all people. That God speaks through the stranger, however, is no reason or basis for melding all differences through self-deceptive tolerance; rather it is the reason why the church must be a universal community capable of showing forth our unity in our diversity. Such unity comes not from the assumption that all people share the same nature, but that we share the same Lord. Though certainly the fact that we believe that we have a common creator provides a basis for some common experience and appeals.

The existence of a community characterized by such unity is crucial, moreover, for moral argument. For if societies such as Harman's second slave society are to be confronted, there must exist a society that provides an alternative. Their assumptions about slavery cannot be susceptible to argument unless an alternative society exists that witnesses and manifests a unity that comes from worship of the single God. The problem with slavery is not that it violates the "inherent dignity of our humanity," but that as a people we have found that we cannot worship together at the table of the Lord if one claims an ownership over others that only God has the right to claim. We have no guarantee, of course, that others will accept such a way of life, but Christians must live with the confidence that others will find that such a life frees them from the fears that give birth to slavery and injustice. God has promised the church that if we are faithful our life will not be without effect. The church's task does not depend on nor is it sustained by such effectiveness, however; it is sustained by our experience that by living faithfully we do find God is the truth of our existence.

It must be admitted that the Christian willingness to accept existence amid the dividedness of the world means that we cannot live without appreciating the tragic character of our world. Elsewhere I have argued that tragedy often involves the conflict of right with right, but such conflict is but a form of a more profound sense of tragedy inherent in living in a divided world. For tragedy consists in the moral necessity of having to risk our lives and the lives of others in order to live faithful to the histories that are the only means we have for knowing and living truthfully.<sup>40</sup>

It is not accidental that this sense of tragedy is particularly useful for an understanding of the moral life that stresses the significance of character. For tragedy and character are but two sides of the same coin. Tragedy is not the result of a "flaw" of character, but the result of living faithful to what is best about our character. Moralistic judgments about weakness of character or the flaw in an otherwise strong person's character result finally in a failure to appreciate how character is at once necessary and the cause of tragedy. No one narrative, much less any one character, is sufficient to embody the richness of

the moral values and virtues of our existence. Our character is therefore the source of our strength, as it provides us with a history of commitment, but in doing so it also sets the stage for the possibility of tragedy.

As John Barbour has suggested, the tragic arises through the "radical incongruity of a basically good person performing actions which lead to evil and self-destructive consequences."<sup>41</sup> The source of each tragedy is a situation in which a character's multiple responsibilities and obligations conflict not only with self-interest, but with each other. Moral choice is potentially tragic when several moral obligations are juxtaposed with the necessity of a single decision having irreversible consequences. "The tragedy is realized when the pursuit of one of a person's duties leads not simply to neglect, but to destruction of the others, and thus to moral evil. And the tragic nature of such a moral dilemma is exacerbated when the moral agent involved is basically a virtuous person—someone who desires to carry out his moral obligations and aspirations, feels his dilemma keenly, and persists in the struggle to act rightly when a less conscientious person would compromise his ideals or shirk his obligations."<sup>42</sup>

I have a hunch that behind those moral theories that seek to deny the radical dividedness of our world, whether they take deontological or utilitarian form, lies a profound attempt to deny this sense of the tragic. But the very attempt to avoid the tragic only makes us more susceptible to it; and, worse still, it leads us to seek to avoid the tragic through violence. As Stanley Cavell has suggested,

In the typical situation of tragic heroes, time and space converge to a point at which an ultimate care is exposed and action must be taken which impales one's life upon the founding care of that life. Death, so caused, may be mysterious, but what founds these lives is clear enough: the capacity to love, the strength to found a life upon a love. That the love becomes incompatible with that life is tragic, but that it is maintained until the end is heroic. People capable of such love could have removed mountains; instead it has caved in upon them. One moral of such events is obvious: if you would avoid tragedy (and suffering), avoid love; if you cannot avoid love, avoid integrity; if you cannot avoid integrity, avoid the world; if you cannot avoid the world, destroy it. Our tragedy differs from this classical chain not in the conclusion but in the fact that the conclusion has been reached without passing through love, in the fact that no love seems worth founding one's life upon, or that society—and therefore I myself—can allow no context in which love for anything but itself can be expressed. Our problem, in getting back to beginnings, will not be to find the thing we have always cared about, but to discover whether we have it in us to care about something.<sup>43</sup>

In a divided world tragedy cannot be denied, but we can find the patience to sustain one another through our tragedies and in so doing provide an alternative to the violence that would force the world into a premature unity. The church in its profoundest expression is the gathering of a people who are able to sustain one another through the inevitable tragedies of our lives. They are able to do so because they have been formed by a narrative, constantly reenacted through the sharing of a meal, that claims nothing less than that God has taken the tragic character of our existence into his very life.

#### 4. The Church and Social Ethics

Of course it may be objected that such a church simply does not exist. Thus Robbins asserts that Christians and the church are at least as fragmented, as far as substantive moral values and judgments are concerned, as any group in contemporary society.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, even if the position I am trying to develop is correct in principle, it fails, for Christians no longer provide the kind of witness and unity I allege they must.

However I refuse to accept Robbins' characterization of the church either as descriptive or normatively correct. To be sure, Christians can often be found on nearly every side of any issue, but they may not be found there as Christians. Theologically the question is not what Christians do think, but what they ought to think given their basic convictions. The modest task of theologians is to help contribute to the discussion of what they ought to think by thinking as clearly as we can. But the theologian must always remember that those not schooled in theology will often lead the way.

Moreover there is no inherent reason that Christians must agree about every issue—after all, as Aristotle reminds us, ethics involves matters that can be other. What is required is not that Christians always agree, but that their agreements and their disagreements reflect their theological convictions. The church no less than any community must provide the political process through which moral issues can be disposed and adjudicated. What is unique about the church is not that such a process is required, or that it does not always produce agreement; what is unique is the kind of concerns that are made subject to the process, the theological convictions that shape our reasoning, and the way the discussion is governed by love.

That such a discussion does not occur often enough in the church is surely regrettable, but even there it is easy to misread the reality of church life. For it is my contention that the church is not nearly as dead as many think. Claims about the moral failure of the "church" characteristically employ a far too restricted sense of "church"—i.e., the Protestant church of America, "Western Christendom," the Roman Catholic Church, and so on.

The church is none of these, but rather the church is where people faithfully carry out the task of being a witness to the reality of God's Kingdom.

Indeed the very selectivity implied in our criticism of the church often is but a sign of our unfaithfulness. Thus many of us criticized the "church" of the South for its failure to provide a prophetic critique and leadership against racism. In our enthusiasm for exposing the "failure" of the church, it was forgotten that the white churches of the South were not the only church there. Indeed, the church did not fail in the South, as black church congregations continued to do the patient work of preparation necessary to create a people sufficient for the coming struggle.

For theologians, therefore, to accept as normative the limits of the current church is an act of irresponsibility. The church that is the subject of theological reflection can never be limited to the present moment but reaches back into history and forward into the future, as both directions provide an indication of what we ought to be. For it is an article of our faith that God will not abandon his church but, generation after generation, will continue to provide faithful witnesses to his Kingdom.

There is a further objection, however, that acknowledges this depiction of the church as a possibility but insists that such a church involves an illegitimate withdrawal from the world. It is certainly true that I think the first social task of the church is to be the church, but there is nothing about that description of the task that warrants the charge of "withdrawal." Rather, such a description, with its corresponding understanding of church polity, requires a rethinking of what most mean by "social ethics."

"Social ethics" is not what the church does after it has got its theological convictions straight and its own house in order. But our theological convictions and corresponding community are a social ethic as they provide the necessary context for us to understand the world in which we live. The church serves the world first by providing categories of interpretation that offer the means for us to understand ourselves truthfully, e.g., we are a sinful yet redeemed people. Interpretation does not preclude action, but our actions can only be effective when they are formed according to a truthful account of the world.

And part of what such an account entails is that the world can never be the church. If this is what is meant by the "withdrawal" charge, then I must accept it as an accurate account of my position. The world cannot be the church, for the world, while still God's good creation, is a realm that knows not God and is thus characterized by the fears that constantly fuel the fires of violence. We live in a mad existence where some people kill other people for abstract and unworthy entities called nations. The church's first task is not to make the nation-state system work, but rather to remind us that the nation, especially as we know it today, is not an ontological necessity for human

living. The church, as an international society, is a sign that God, not nations, rule this world.

The Christian's distrust of violence—and it must be remembered that the just war tradition distrusts violence no less than the pacifist<sup>45</sup>—is but an indication of the church's commitment to the unity denied by the disunity created by nations, cultural systems, and other limited commitments. This distrust of violence does not mean that Christians are prohibited from trying to make nations in which they find themselves more just, unless one has concluded that justice can be accomplished only through violence or the threat of violence. As Christians we are committed to the view that justice is possible between peoples because trust is finally a deeper reality in our lives than distrust, because God's justice is more profound than injustice. Such a view is not an unrealistic, idealistic, or utopian strategy; it is built on the profoundly realistic hope that God, not man, rules the world.

The concrete form of the church's social ethic will differ from one social setting to another. General claims about the relation of church to world are never sufficient and cannot be substituted for the hard work of social analysis and of particular societies. Certainly philosophical and scientific tools are extremely useful for such analysis. Yet the church must be careful that such tools do not substitute for the necessity of making clear that its social ethic can never be identical with what appear to be the progressive programs of a particular society.

This is a particularly important challenge for the church that continues to exist in Western civilization. For our identification with that civilization has been so complete that we have tended to forget that the church's future is not the future of "western democracies." There is, to be sure, much that is positive about these social systems that Christians should rightly value.<sup>46</sup> But we must also remember that their liberty is not the liberty of God, nor is their justice the justice that we have come to know through being a member of God's people. Our task is not to make these nations the church, but rather to remind them that they are but nations. From the world's perspective, that may not seem like much, but the perspective of the people formed by the story of God's redemption shows us how important a task it is. For the idolatry most convenient to us all remains the presumed primacy of the nation-state.

## 6. The Virtues and Our Communities: Human Nature As History

### 1. The Virtues: Past and Current Status

In common discourse there is a general agreement that virtue and the virtues are important, but philosophically or theologically there is no consensus on how the virtues should be understood or the significance they have or ought to have in accounts of morality. Whether virtue is one or many, what the individual virtues are or which are primary, whether the virtues can conflict, how they are acquired, the locus of the virtues, are all questions on which there is little agreement and even less discussion. Such questions assume that virtue is a central concept for moral reflection, a presupposition that most current theories of morality do not share.

For the Greeks, as well as the Christians, virtue was the central concept for moral reflection. Although there was no complete consensus about what constitutes virtue or which virtues should be considered primary, it was accepted that consideration of morality began with descriptions of the virtuous life. Ethics grew from questions of what individuals should be; armed with answers, the ancients then turned to prescriptive modes.

For the Greeks the term virtue, *aretè*, meant that which causes a thing to perform its function well. *Arete* was an excellence of any kind that denotes the power of anything to fulfill its function.<sup>1</sup> Thus the virtue of the eye is seeing; the virtue of a knife is cutting; the virtue of a horse is running, and so on. All accounts of virtue involve some combination of excellence and power. One cannot exist without the other. Later Aquinas defined virtue as simply a "certain perfection of power."<sup>2</sup>

On the analogy that virtue was that which caused a thing to perform its function well, it seemed that human virtue would be that which caused us to fulfill our function as humans. But then the meaning and content of virtue would be relative to the controverted issue of what is "human nature." To add complexity, some accounts insisted that the virtues were not "in" one, but "added" to our powers, thereby creating "powers," not simply perfecting potential.